

Democracy and its discontents in post-wall Germany

Hofferbert, Richard I.; Klingemann, Hans-Dieter

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**Democracy and Its Discontents
in Post-Wall Germany**

Richard I. Hofferbert and Hans-Dieter Klingemann

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Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH (WZB)
Reichpietschufer 50, D-10785 Berlin,
Telefon (030) 25 49 1-0

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Zusammenfassung

Die hier vorgelegte Untersuchung analysiert politische Einstellungen und Verhaltensabsichten von „zufriedenen Demokraten“, „unzufriedenen Demokraten“ und „Nicht-Demokraten“ in Ost- und Westdeutschland. Unzufriedenheit mit der Politik führt in der Regel zu einer verstärkten Unterstützung demokratischer Oppositionsparteien, unter bestimmten Bedingungen aber auch zur Wahl extremer Oppositionsparteien. Die Untersuchung ergibt, dass Nicht-Demokraten, die in Ost- und Westdeutschland allerdings nur einen sehr geringen Prozentsatz ausmachen, ihre Unzufriedenheit weniger durch die Wahl einer extremen Partei, als durch einen Rückzug aus der Politik ausdrücken. Die Daten der repräsentativen Bevölkerungsumfrage zeigen in einigen Aspekten Unterschiede in bestimmten Wertorientierungen und im Demokratieverständnis der Ost- und der Westdeutschen. Daraus ergeben sich allerdings keine gravierenden Konsequenzen für den demokratischen Prozess. In beiden Teilen Deutschlands führen politische Unzufriedenheiten in aller Regel zur Wahl demokratischer Oppositionsparteien. Unzufriedenheit mit der Performanz des demokratischen Systems in Deutschland kann deshalb eher als Stimulus und weniger als Bedrohung der Demokratie interpretiert werden.

Abstract

This paper traces the political behavior intentions of “satisfied democrats,” “dissatisfied democrats,” and “non-democrats” in western and eastern Germany. Dissatisfaction is most commonly expressed in support for the loyal opposition, with some minor tilt toward parties of the ends of the spectrum. Non-democrats, a very small percentage of the populace, more commonly express their disapproval through withdrawal rather than through active extremism. Based on a 1997 general population survey, the analysis reveals some differences in the magnitude of western versus eastern conceptions of the elements that make up “democracy.” But most of those differences get channeled into seemingly benign forms of political participation. The core of the findings is that dissatisfaction with democracy may well be a healthy stimulant rather than a threat to the vitality of either established or emerging democracies.

Democracy and Its Discontents in Post-Wall Germany

Since the fall of communism in Europe, much has been learned about the extent to which citizens in that part of the world are satisfied with the structure and performance of their political systems. Most of that research has rested on the assumption that the breadth and depth of citizens' satisfaction is a measure of progress toward democratization (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, 1998). Other research has inquired into the types of institutional structures that enhance or inhibit satisfaction with democratic performance (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Norris, 1999, Chapter 13). And a good deal of the research tracks over time and across countries the intricacies of democratic satisfaction and related political attitudes (Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Norris, 1999).

In this essay we are concerned with the extent and consequences of differences in political outlooks on either side of the former west-east border in Germany and with the capacity of German political practices to manage those differences. With survey data collected six years after unification,¹ we ask:

- How big is the west-east difference in certain fundamental values about the role of the state in society?
- What is the form and extent of differences in definitions of *democracy* in post-Wall Germany?
- How far apart are the citizens of both parts in their evaluations of their formally unified political system?
- Of those who are satisfied or dissatisfied with political life in today's Germany, to what extent are they, nonetheless, committed to the principles of *democracy*? And, finally,
- To what extent can the available channels of political participation absorb these various inclinations?

There is a certain irony in the progress of research on satisfaction with and/or trust of modern democratic governments. The course of inquiry and writing on western, established democracies had become quite critical, if not downright pessimistic, at just about the same time that the *third wave* of democratic experimentation crested in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki, 1976; King, 1975). It is as though the

1 The survey was conducted on behalf of the German Paul Lazarsfeld Society and the research program on Institutions and Social Change of the Social Science Research Center—Berlin. The data were collected by the FORSA Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analysen mbH. The sample consisted of 1,960 citizens in the old and 665 in the new Länder (18 years and older). The interviews were selected via random digit dialing. Percentages are weighted by Land, gender, and age.

people who had taken to the streets of Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, Sofia, and Bucharest in 1989 or a couple of years later in Vilnius, Tallin, and the other sites in the formerly communist world had not read their political science.

A central tenet of democracy, as a system of governance, is its purported ability to accommodate political differences and to transform them into collectively creative rather than destructive forms. That is why *democracy* is so commonly defined in terms of *processes* rather than *products*. But there is always, beneath such a definition, a lingering concern about the extent to which the products are of sufficient attractiveness to sustain the legitimacy of the processes. We are here addressing such a concern to the contemporary German experience.

The Setting

The Berlin Wall opened late on a November evening in 1989. By the end of 1990, the formal division between the western Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the eastern German Democratic Republic (GDR) was constitutionally eliminated, and a new parliament had been elected by the voters of the unified country. In the ensuing half-decade a massive fund transfer from west to east had begun reorganizing economic enterprises and building modern infrastructure in the former GDR. The decision had been taken and implementation begun to move the capital from Bonn to its historic setting in Berlin. By mid-decade, a forest of construction cranes had transformed the formerly desolate, intra-wall area into some of the most expensive real estate on earth. Despite widespread grumbling and serious economic pitfalls, the physical wall and its remnants had been razed.

But mention is often made of a *wall in the mind*—a mental distance and disaffection that leave western Germans often wondering if the burdens of unification were worth the gain and that leave easterners feeling like second class citizens, with a strain of selective nostalgia for some of the more comforting aspects of the old regime (see Klingemann and Hofferbert, 1994). To re-cast slightly the questions posed in our introduction, above, we ask:

- Does the *Wall in the Mind* have a political manifestation? And, if so;
- What does that political manifestation say about the quality of democracy in both parts of unified Germany?

A Political Wall in the Mind?

Attitudes Toward Equality and Socialism

Are there fundamental differences between the east and the west on basic conceptions of public life and the role of the state in that life? Compared to their western competitors, the former communist systems, in their day, certainly revealed different conceptions of the relative weight given to *socialism* versus *capitalism* as modes of economic management. Further, the two systems manifested different relative emphases on individual *freedom* versus *equality*. These distinctions are the substance of the responses displayed in Figure 1. (See Fuchs, 1999 for a more extensive discussion of this pattern.)

When asked to make a choice between more equality and more freedom a majority in both parts of Germany opted for more equality. The enduring commitment to the special German concept of the *social market* economy—a term often baffling to the uninitiated—is reflected in Figure 1. Over one-half of the westerners opt for equality. But that commitment is not sufficient to close the east-west gap, with fully three-quarters of the easterners favoring more equality over more freedom. And a similar distribution is observed regarding the claim that socialism was a pretty good idea, flawed only by bad implementation. The 20-point difference in the former case and the 22-point difference in the latter speak to a rather large gap in value orientations.²

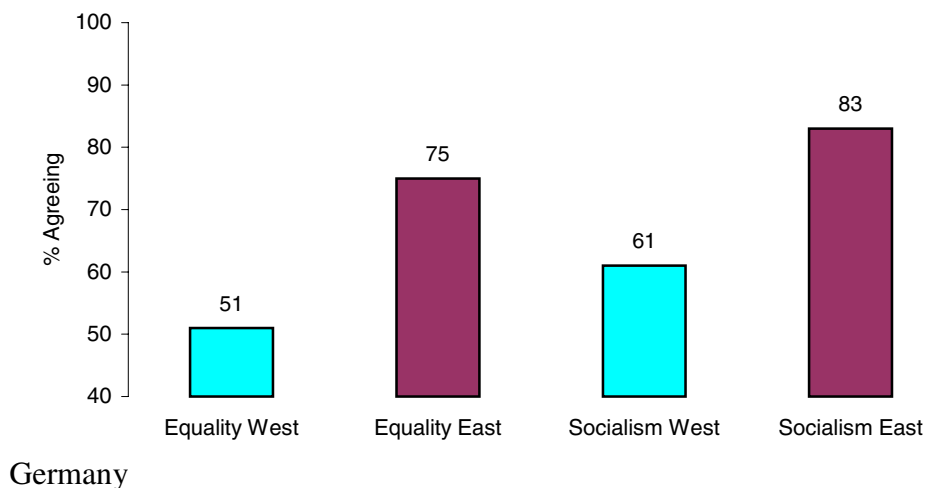
Some would argue, perhaps, that the greater eastern commitment to certain aspects of collectivism is more nostalgia than an active orientation toward current political conditions. However, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it seems reasonable to treat the data reported in Figure 1 as indicators of pretty basic political values. They certainly reflect a central aspect of the long-enduring left-right dimension (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990). And for all their general commitment to a broad concept of social justice, the depth of admiration for social leveling in the west is far surpassed in the east. If this evidence does not indicate an attitudinal wall, it certainly suggests a sizeable fence. Are there other, perhaps more detailed manifestations of this west-east difference?

2 The survey upon which our analysis is based was conducted in 1997, long enough after unification for most of the euphoria and some of residue of resentment of the old regime in the east to have subsided. Ample time had passed for citizens to display the more-or-less enduring elements of their individual beliefs and values, stripped of the highly charged emotions associated with the fall of the Wall and the immediately ensuing changes.

Definitions of Democracy

Much survey research since the fall of communism in Central and East Europe has focused on levels of satisfaction with democratic performance, reasonably assuming that expressions of satisfaction are good indicators of progress in democratic consolidation and the construction of a civil society (Fuchs and Roller, 1998; Hofferbert and Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 1999; and Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, 1998). A question left open by much of the democratic satisfaction research is: What do people in different places and times mean by *democracy*? The survey we are using here addressed that definitional consideration directly.

Figure 1: “Equality” and “Socialism” as Political Values in Western vs. Eastern



Equality (over Freedom):

“Two people have a conversation about what is more important in the end, freedom or as much equality as possible. Which of the two expresses what you think yourself?”

I think that freedom and as much equality as possible are both equally important. But if I had to prefer one over the other, I would choose personal freedom, that is, everyone can live in freedom and express herself or himself without constraint.

To be sure: freedom and as much equality as possible are both equally important. But if I had to prefer one over the other, I would prefer as much equality as possible; that is, no one being disadvantaged and social differences are not so large.”

(Numbers above columns indicate percent preferring equality over freedom)

Socialism:

“In principle, socialism is a good idea that was carried out badly.”

(Numbers above columns indicate percent fully or rather agree)

Thus, we can inquire as to the extent to whether definitions of *democracy* are similar or different in the two parts of Germany. That is, does the word mean the same thing on either side of the former border?

In the May, 1997 survey a sample of 2,625 residents of Germany were asked an extensive list of questions about their political beliefs and judgments. Among those questions was a battery of items that might be included in a definition of democracy—items that can be roughly divided into indicators of *values and processes* (often labeled *political rights*), on the one hand, and *socioeconomic conditions* (often labeled *social rights*) on the other. The results, for both eastern and western German respondents are displayed in Figure 2.

The dividing line among democratic theorists is between those who advance more procedural versus those who argue for more policy-oriented or socioeconomic definitions of democracy. By the former, rights to freedom of expression and assembly, to press and religion are often linked to processes such as elections, party competition, and open parliaments. By the latter, such proscriptive and institutional forms are viewed as vacuous if they do not ensure such elements of social justice as a right to education, employment, protection in one's old age, health care and even—by some critics—a right to leisure and recreation.³

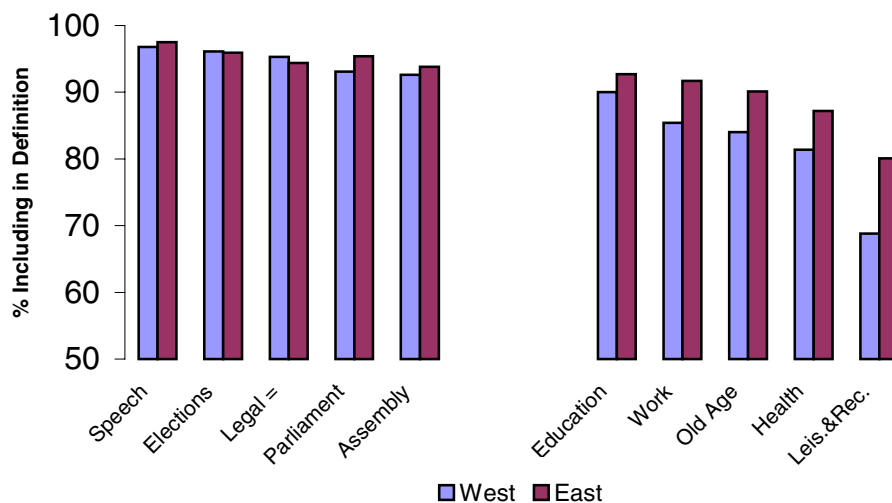
The first message of Figure 2, taking into account both aspects of the definition, is that the citizens of the former FRG and GDR share a common priority of elements that define *democracy*. The order of items included in their definitions is nearly identical, both with respect to values and processes (left five features) and to social and economic components (right five features). That is, freedom of speech is the most widely included feature of *democracy*, followed by the other nine aspects, ending with a right to leisure and recreation as the least commonly cited feature.

The second message of the figure is that, to the extent there are differences between what people in the western and the eastern parts of Germany include in their conception of democracy, the disagreement is in the realm of social and economic features. Of the five such characteristics listed (education, work, old age, health, and leisure and recreation), the percentage of easterners considering these aspects of the welfare state as among democracy's defining attributes is higher for each feature than it is among their western counterparts. But how much of a difference is a *difference*? Note that again the ordering of elements is the same in both the west and in the east, that is education ranks highest, with the other four socioeconomic features ordered the same by both parts of the German population. The differences range from 2.7 percentage points regarding education to 11.3 regarding the right to leisure time and recreation.

3 The elements included in our survey are summaries of specific provisions of the 1949 Basic Law (as amended) of the FRG and/or the 1974 Constitution of the GDR.

There is a certain curiosity piqued by a comparison of Figures 1 and 2. The greater eastern approval of equality and of socialism does not translate itself into equally striking differences in what is included in a definition of democracy. While the easterners are more inclined to include socioeconomic conditions in their definitions (Figure 2), they do not do so to the same extent that they seem to value those conditions in isolation (Figure 1).

Figure 2: Definitions of “Democracy” in Western and Eastern Germany: Values and Processes vs. Socioeconomic Conditions



“People associate very different things with a democracy. I am going to read off a list of characteristics. For each one would you please tell me how much, in principle, it has to do with a democracy: a lot, somewhat, not much or nothing at all?” (*Percent a lot and somewhat—arrayed by western percent*)

‘Democracy’ as Values and Processes

Freedom of speech

Free and secret elections

Equality before the law—Legal =

A parliament that represents the interests of the citizens

Freedom of assembly

‘Democracy’ as Protection of Socioeconomic Conditions

Right to education

Right to work

Right to old age security

Right to health care

Right to leisure time and recreation—Leis&Rec.

Attitudes are customarily defined by social psychologists as *predispositions to action*—note the *predispositions*. They are not to be equated with action. Some catalyst is required in order for predispositions to be activated. For many eastern Germans, thinking about what they mean by democracy does not catalyze their collectivist tendencies. When conceiving of democracy, just as in the west, greater weight is given to political rights and

the common institutional accoutrements of democracy—not necessarily at the expense of social rights, but in apparent precedence to them (Roller, 1999).

So far we have looked at east-west German similarities and differences in social values and in conceptions of democracy. The similarities exceed the differences between west and east, but the differences cannot be ignored. In what context would the predispositions tapped by these differences appear likely to become manifest?

Evaluations of Political Performance

For over thirty years, but most noteworthy after surveys in the early 1970s revealed a steep decline in Americans' trust in government, the amount of research on citizens' evaluations of political performance has steadily risen. The *third wave* of democratization has sparked a multiplication of concern with the performance of democracy and/or the officials elected in democracies (Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Nye, Zelikow, and King, 1997). Attention is now shared between the older and the newer democracies.⁴ Data are getting richer. Research techniques are getting more refined and shifting to the specific linkage between political institutional forms (Anderson and Guillory, 1997), policy performance (Klingemann and Hofferbert, 1999), and citizens' evaluations (See also various essays in Norris, *op.cit.* as well as Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, 1998).

Democracy, Regime, and Authorities

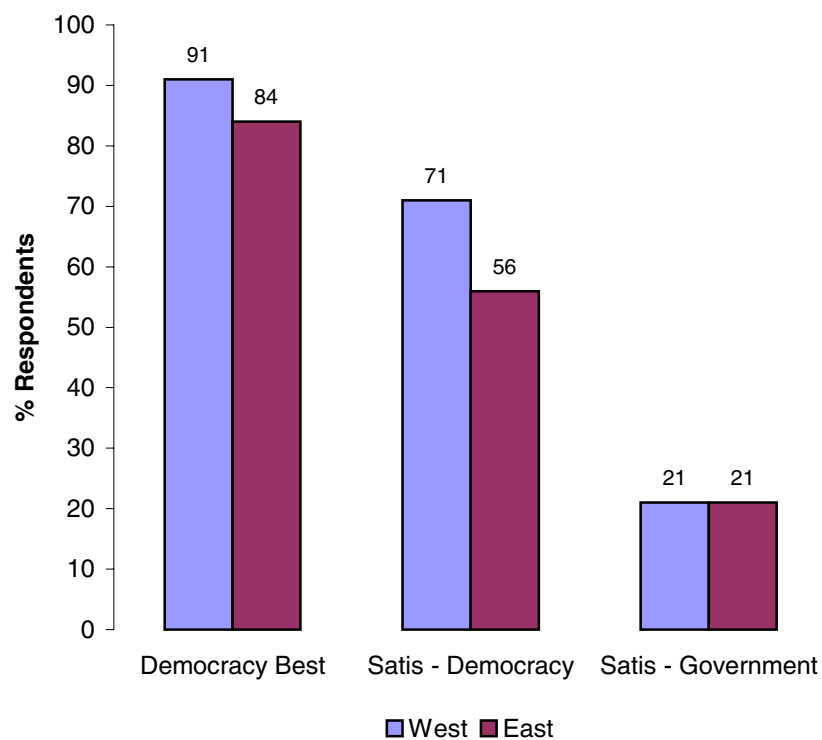
A distinction made more often in theoretical discussion than in empirical application is that between the *regime* and the *incumbent authorities* (Easton, 1965, 1975). Here, we will try to honor that distinction by analyzing some indicators of each categories with respect to comparative levels of support in the two regions of post-Wall Germany. Figure 3 presents the broad form of this distinction, preceded by a measure of the overall support of Germans for *democracy* as a system of government.

Both western and eastern Germans' support for democracy as the preferred form of government is toward the top of the level found in other countries around the world (see Klingemann's presentation of World Values Survey data, in Norris, 1999, Table 2.6). Likewise the extent of contentment with the existing regime is, again, above the norm for

4 The state of inquiry in both regards is well-represented by the volume edited by Pippa Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

other countries where it has been examined (Klingemann, *op.cit.*, Table 2.8). Where approval plummets is with the performance of the contemporary government—a fact made manifest by the Germans the year following this survey when they, for the first time since the founding of the FRG in 1949, used the electoral process to eject a governing coalition.⁵

Figure 3: Value of Democracy, Satisfaction with Democracy, and Evaluation of Governmental Performance: Western vs. Eastern



Democracy Best: *Democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government.* (Percent *strongly agree* and *agree*.)

Satis. Democracy (*regime* satisfaction): *In general, what is your opinion about democracy in Germany, that is to say about our whole political system, as laid down in the Constitution?* (Percent *very satisfied* and *rather satisfied*)

Satis. Government (*authorities* satisfaction): *How satisfied are you—in general—with the present performance of the federal government?* (Percent *very satisfied* and *satisfied*).

There are indeed west-east differences in the extent of approval of democracy in the abstract (91 vs. 84 percent) and in the general functioning of the regime (71 vs. 56 percent). But in 1997, there was no such difference in the level of approval for the incumbent government, with only 21 percent in each region registering positive evaluations. The west-east difference is concentrated in those domains where there is highest approval in

⁵ All previous changes of government in the Federal Republic were by reorganization of government coalition—each of which was always confirmed in the subsequent election.

both regions, namely the commitment to democracy and satisfaction with its implementation. Where there is strong discontent, with the actual performance of the government in office, there is no west-east difference.

Evaluation of Performance Features

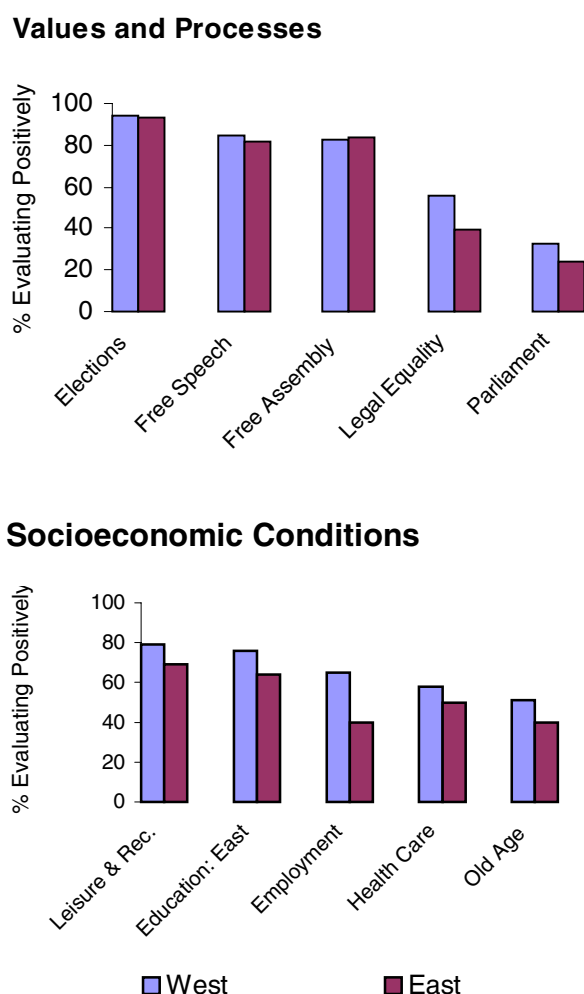
Do the differences in regime evaluation—the center pair of bars in Figure 3—indicate a potential danger to the long term stability of unified Germany, or for the inclusion of both regions into a common political culture? The “long term,” of course, has not yet played out. Disasters can happen. But if the 44 percent of eastern Germans who did not express satisfaction with the performance of their new democracy were disposed to disruptive action, then Germany would be in political trouble. Before coming to such an unsettling conclusion, however, we can inquire further into more specific targets of discontent.

Having identified elements included in the definition of democracy (Figure 2) it behooves us to use those same elements as standards of evaluation. Thus, Figure 4 displays the extent of positive evaluations for features included in those definitions—values and processes, Figure 4 is a refinement of that in Figure 2. That is, the orderings of evaluations in the east and west are largely symmetrical. The deviations are slight: Westerners are satisfied with the implementation of freedom of speech more than that of assembly, whereas in the east, that order is reversed by a modest margin. Likewise, more westerners are satisfied with the right to employment than to health care, whereas the order is reversed in the east. Given the striking differentials in employment rates in the two regions, even after seven years of unification and west-to-east financial and managerial assistance, such an evaluation is hardly surprising. But the overall array is, nonetheless, quite similar between west and east.

In the domain of values and processes, the least satisfactory performance evaluations are assigned to legal equality and to the performance of parliament in representing “...the interests of the citizenry.” Independent analyses show that, in the twenty-five countries in which two waves of the World Values Survey assessed confidence in national parliaments, all but five experienced declines between the early and mid-1990s, with Germany registering a rate of decline rather in excess of that of other established democracies (Klingemann, 1999a, Table 2.11). By 1995 Germany dropped to the third quartile among a set including both older and newer democracies. After 15 years of Christian-Liberal coalition and a single chancellor, Germans were not happy with their parliament, a fact that, as noted above, they seem to have registered in the 1998 election. The unhappiness was a bit more pronounced in the east than in the west.

Nor were they happy in either region with the status of *equality before the law* (*Gleichheit vor dem Gesetz*: west = 54 percent; east = 39 percent). This is a finding not to be readily dismissed. The lower eastern numbers may be due in some measure to lingering resentment and a sense of having been unfairly treated on the part of many former members of the communist establishment who had been adjudged unqualified to continue in comparable positions after unification. It is also difficult to know how much confounding there is across items. Does the attractiveness of socialism and the commitment to equality, in the face of the collapse of the old (socialist) system and a perceived rise in material inequalities, confound evaluations of the rule of law (the *Rechtsstaat*)?

Figure 4: Evaluation of Features of “Democracy” in Western and Eastern Germany



Evaluation: Percent of respondents who indicate that the particular feature is *well-implemented* or *implemented* “...in present day Germany.”

Roughly the same pattern of common west-east ordering (with the noted exceptions of employment and health care) and magnitude of greater eastern discontent applies to the five categories of socioeconomic conditions as to the two major sources of discontent with political processes. A strong message does not ring out in clarion tones from the patterns displayed in Figure 4.

We have one more way, however, in which to slice the data in order to try to tease out the message for the political system, and especially for the newly democratized eastern Germans. This is to juxtapose support for democracy, in principle, with evaluations of regime performance.

Satisfied Democrats, Dissatisfied Democrats, and Non-Democrats

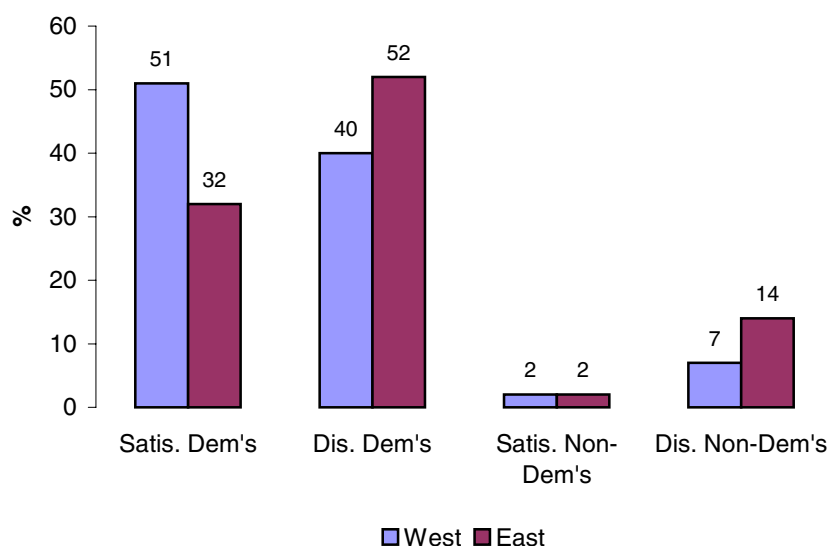
Patterns of Discontent

Figure 5 reports west and east results of a four-fold classification of the survey respondents. It demonstrates clearly that those who are discontent with German politics have not necessarily lost their commitment to democracy as the best option around. Figure 3 showed that a large majority in both regions accept the premise that democracy, as a system of governance, is superior to all known rivals. Of those, however, about half of Germans are discontent with the implementation of that principle. These, we have labeled *dissatisfied democrats*. They are disproportionately distributed across the two regions of Germany, with a rather higher concentration in the east.

To our thinking, this mode of subclassifying the discontented, especially identifying the category of *dissatisfied democrats*, raises a caution about analyses resting simply on the total population of persons dissatisfied with the performance of the regime with which they live. Central among the premises of post-Enlightenment political theory is the turn away from absolutism to the imposition of limits on and barriers to the actions of those endowed with the powers of the state. The citizen of a democracy is not cowed by the accoutrements of authority. Libertarians should cheer the decline in trust of government, urging all to keep a sharp and wary eye on the holders of public office. Even those supporters of the aggressive welfare state vigorously support such constraints on power as civil liberties, rights to opposition, and the other common processes that keep politicians in check. So, the fact that half of the German respondents are dissatisfied with the performance of their democracy may indicate nothing more than the reasonable, healthy wariness of attentive democratic citizens.

However, we are as yet unsure what to make of the east-west difference. This is not a coin-tossing situation between pessimism and optimism respecting dissatisfaction among Germans. The data allow for a bit more insight, especially in tracing the channels of political action among the various categories in Figure 5. Even though our numbers of non-democrats are small, we would be remiss to ignore them. (We do merge the two categories of *satisfied* and *dissatisfied* non-democrats into the single category of *non-democrats*.) If angry enough, these people, even though few in percentage terms, can be disruptive, as was seen for a time in the early 1990s with numerous xenophobic outbursts against foreigners.

Figure 5: Support for and Satisfaction with Democracy in Western and Eastern Germany



Satis. Dem's (Satisfied Democrats):

Percent responding to the combination:

Strongly agree or agree to:

A. Democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government.

and also *Very satisfied or satisfied to:*

B. How satisfied are you—in general—with way democracy works in Germany?

Dis. Dem's (Dissatisfied Democrats):

Percent responding to the combination:

Strongly agree or agree to A.

but also *Not very satisfied or not at all satisfied to B.*

Satis. Non-Dem's (Satisfied Non-Democrats):

Percent responding to the combination:

Disagree or strongly disagree to A.

but also *Very satisfied or satisfied to: B.*

Dis. Non-Dem's (Dissatisfied Non-Democrats)

Percent responding to the combination:

Disagree or strongly disagree to A.

and also *Not very satisfied or not at all satisfied to B.*

Satisfaction and Voting Orientation

Figure 6 indicates the party orientation of satisfied democrats, dissatisfied democrats, and non-democrats, in both the western and eastern parts of Germany.⁶ The first observation suggested by this array is that the differences between the three orientation sets is more striking than are those between the two regions. Therefore, we shall comment on the arrays from top to bottom in Figure 6, with additional commentary on west-east differences where they are appropriate. Three overall patterns can be identified in this array: a) The *loyal opposition* effect, b) the *polarization* effect, and c) the *withdrawal* effect.

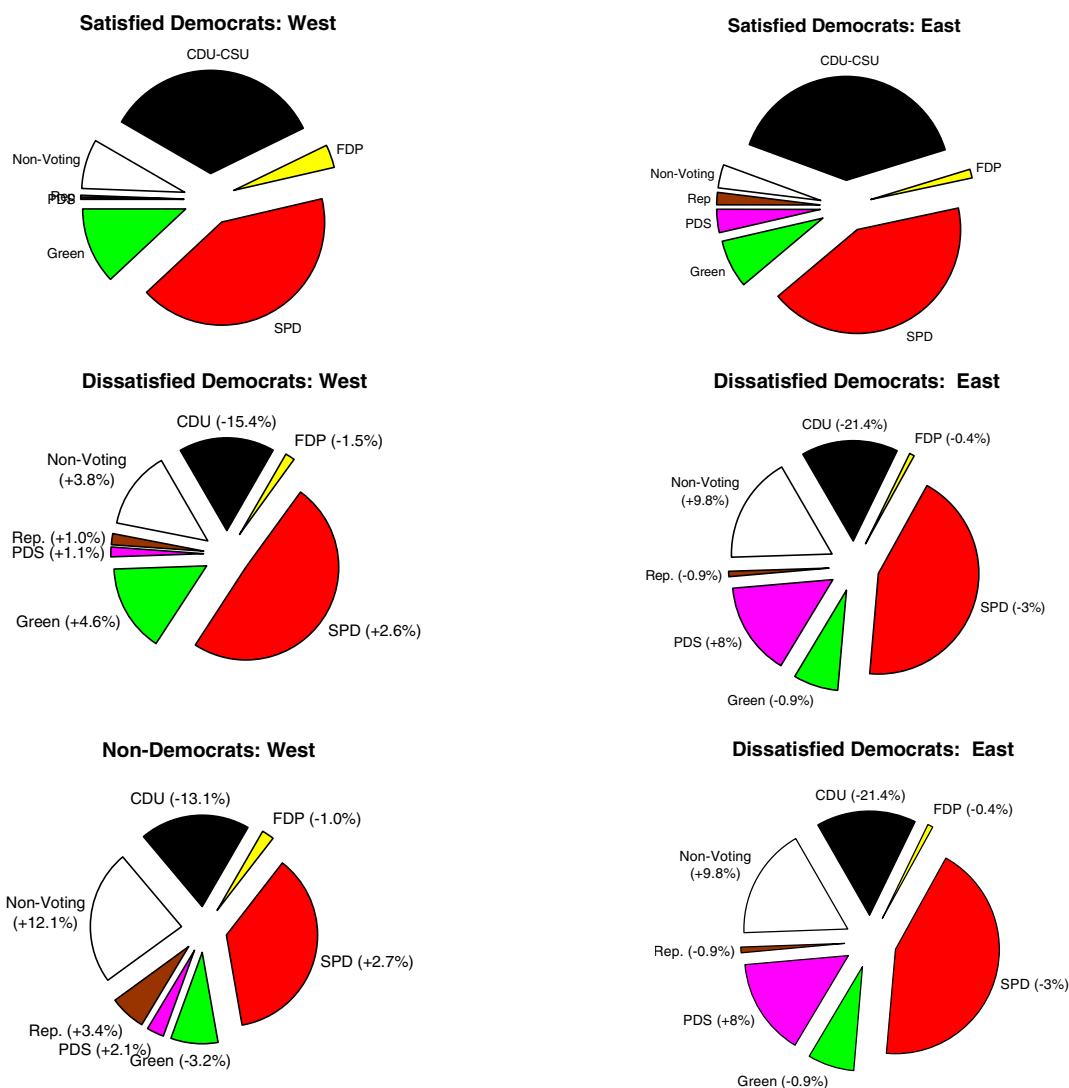
The *loyal opposition* effect is what one would expect from the normal operation of party competition in a democracy. If, as we have earlier argued, the main source of dissatisfaction with political life in Germany is not directed at the regime, then people who identify with the opposition, as in any democracy, focus their discontent on the performance of the incumbent authorities, contrasted to a preference for the mainstream opposition. Such dissatisfaction need not be expected to take the form of politically malignant behavior. Thus, there is less support for the incumbents (in this case, CDU and FDP) among both dissatisfied democrats and non-democrats, at about the same level in both the western and the eastern parts of Germany (see note to Figure 6).

Polarization occurs when those not satisfied with the current situation—regime and/or authorities—move to the political extremes. Certainly in terms of the customary left-right spectrum, those positions are here represented by the PDS on the left and the Republikaner on the right. One may question the extent to which the positions of either of these fall within the domain of healthy democratic discourse. That is, however, another question than the one being considered here. Our concern is, given the poles represented on the ballot, to what extent do discontented voters cluster toward the ends? Among the dissatisfied democrats of the west, there is a slight trace of such behavior, in the roughly 1.0 percentage point increase in support by dissatisfied democrats for the PDS and for the Republikaner. The polarization effect is a bit more pronounced among the non-democrats,

6 Respondents were asked to indicate for which party they anticipated voting. The CDU (Christian Democratic Union), together with its Bavarian (CSU; Christian Social Union) counterpart to whom it is permanently aligned, is the major right of center party. The SPD (Social Democratic Party) is the left-of center equivalent. The FDP (Free Democratic Party) is in the European liberal tradition, stressing secularism, civil liberties, and market economics. The Greens, the environmental party, are the newest competitors to take part in government at the land and federal level. The PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) is the successor to the communist party of the GDR (the SED; Socialist Unity Party). And the Republikaner are a fairly recent arrival on the right end of the German political spectrum, stressing nationalist themes, in particular policies to restrain immigration. At the time of this survey, May 1997, the CDU/CSU and the FDP had been the federal governing coalition since 1982. They were defeated in the 1998 election, being replaced by a SPD-Green coalition. For a further elaboration, see Klingemann, 1999b.

with a movement of 2-3 percent toward the range-anchoring parties, in both the west and the east. The dominant feature of the non-democrats, however, is seen in the *withdrawal* effect.

*Figure 6: Voting Patterns of Satisfied Dissatisfied Democrats, and Non-Democrats: Western and Eastern Germany (1997)**



* Parenthesized figures for parties among the dissatisfied democrats and non-democrats indicate the deviation, in each region, from the percentages among the satisfied democrats. The percentages of the total sample for the three orientation sets are: Satisfied democrats, 44.3 percent; dissatisfied democrats, 41 percent, and; non-democrats, 10.4 percent.

Among writings on trust in or satisfaction with political performance is what we might label the *civic discouragement* hypothesis: The citizens who are disgruntled will engage

less and less in conventional political participation (Norris, Ch. 13.). Non-voting does increase as one moves from satisfied democrats to dissatisfied democrats to non-democrats. In the east, withdrawal is obvious in both the latter two categories. But the clearest cases of withdrawal are among the non-democrats, in both regions of Germany. Analysis of the capacity of the German party system to channel discontent has, in summary, revealed three patterns. Dissatisfied democrats show their discontent in *loyal opposition* behavior, supporting the mainstream opposition parties. Again, we cannot avoid noting that this tilt toward the opposition seems to have made itself evident in the 1998 election.⁷ *Polarization* is evident in rather small percentages, with the only striking instance being the apparently persistent support by a small core of voters in the east for the reincarnated / reformed communists—the Party of Democratic Socialism.

The extent of *withdrawal* while modest by cross-national standards, is nevertheless a patterned element in democratic discontent. Even among those who accept democracy as the best alternative form of government, but are discontent with the operation of their own, the tendency to withdraw is greater than among those who express contentment with the way things are. And, among the non-democrats, the tendency is even sharper. But, however much this may be a source of concern for the overall health of German democracy, it is *not* a particularly west-east phenomenon.

Conclusion

The age-old political challenge is to design institutions of government that fit the circumstances of the governed. That challenge inspires constitution writers and advocates of institutional reform. In the German case, it could be argued that those steering the processes of unification in 1990 dodged the issue. They simply extended the FRG's Basic Law (Constitution) to the new eastern Länder. Thus, our main goal here is not so much to demonstrate the importance or unimportance of west-east differences as it is to ask: To what extent are the channels of conventional political participation able to accommodate the discontents and differences that exist in the German polity and its major parts?

We have introduced an important intermediate consideration, based on the subclassification of dissatisfaction with the performance of the Germany's version of a democratic regime (Figure 5). Not all discontent need be a threat to a democratic regime. We con-

7 Our ideal research agenda would, therefore, include a panel study, in which those who were dissatisfied in 1997, and expressed support for the mainstream opposition parties, were, after the turnover in 1998, more satisfied with the performance of their democracy and/or the federal government, and, vice versa for the supporters of the CDU and the FDP. Were that the case, it would be very strong evidence in support of the argument that democratic dissatisfaction is largely a matter of routine winning and losing.

struct measures of three sets, in terms of the coincidence of approval of democracy in the abstract and content/discontent with its actual operation. These three sets are *satisfied democrats*, *dissatisfied democrats*, and *non-democrats*. The findings are clear and the interpretation relatively straightforward (Figure 6).

By far, the greatest number of both dissatisfied democrats and non-democrats vote for the established, mainstream parties. Compared to satisfied democrats, however, dissatisfied democrats vote a bit more for parties at the ends of the ideological spectrum—the PDS on the left and the Republikaner on the right. One can argue about the fit of these parties in the arena of legitimate democratic disputation. The case is probably a good deal stronger for the PDS than for the radically right-wing Republikaner, if on no other grounds than the commitment to democratic processes evident in the governmental performance of other descendants of the communists elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. There is some support for the *civic discouragement* hypothesis, in that withdrawal from conventional channels of participation, was greater (although below statistical significance) among the dissatisfied than among the satisfied democrats.

Such was clearly more the case for the *non-democrats*, that is, that modest percentage who dissented from the claim that democracy was preferable to the alternatives. Although most of them still adhered to the mainline parties, they did vote in greater numbers than either of the other two categories for the nationalistic Republikaner. But, most significant, the non-democrats disproportionately did not intend to vote at all.

The role of the communist-successor parties throughout the newly democratizing countries of Europe is a matter of controversy, both on the hustings and in academic circles. In several countries they have led elective governments, with no apparent change in the trajectory toward either a market economy or democratic consolidation. In 1999, the communist President of Poland not only presided over his nation's entry into NATO, but he also claimed it was the most important event since the conversion of the Poles to Christianity (and this in the Pope's homeland). As of early 1999, the PDS was a coalition partner in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and a non-coalition supporter of the minority SPD government in the state of Saxony-Anhalt. Our data do not address the electoral advantage of accommodation or resistance to the former communists. But they do suggest a salutary contribution by the party system's capacity to channel seemingly discredited loyalties to more-or-less conventional modes of behavior.

It is not clear that solace should be taken from the fact that only a bit over 1/10 of the respondents are willing to express their disapproval of democracy as a system of government. If that is an accurate figure and they all decide tomorrow to begin throwing Molotov cocktails at department stores or to launch violent assaults against immigrants, the country has a problem. Most non-democrats—but a smaller share than of the other two types—

stay with the mainstream parties, with the percentage expressing adherence to the SPD being about equal to the percentage of satisfied democrats (31.8 versus 33.4). But the most striking comparative numbers are those on non-voting. The non-democrats, disproportionately, withdraw. Over sixteen percent of them opt out. There is also a hint that some of them may go to the radical rightist Republikaner (3.6 percent versus 0.3 and 1.1), though the numbers are well below the reach of statistical confidence.

Questions remain regarding the non-voting of the self-ascribed non-democrats. Is their disproportionate non-participation a sign of de-politicization, in which case they become at most a footnote about some quietly grumpy, politically irrelevant people? Or does this withdrawal indicate a possible malignancy that if aggravated by an extremist elite could become dangerous? One would need more detail than our survey allowed in order to settle those questions. But our suspicion is in favor of the quiet grumpy rather than the potential malignancy hypothesis.

We put it forth that if the dissatisfied vote for a mainstream opposition party the mechanisms of representative democracy are working. Regardless of their form of discontent (dissatisfied democrats or non-democrats), most of Germany's discontented stay with the mainstream parties. Among those who do not, the dissatisfied democrats move to the left via the PDS, with a very slight increase in support for the extreme right. The non-democrats who do not vote mainstream usually do not vote at all, but some move to the extreme right-wing, although their numbers seem to be miniscule.

With the exception of the greater support for the PDS (the descendants of the GDR's communist party) the regional differences in party support by each of these three types were not consequential. Once we investigate the channeling of political discontent through the electoral process the evidence of a political *wall in the mind* virtually disappears. The exception is the concentration of support in the east for the successors to the GDR communists. Without making an ideological assessment of the PDS, we see the evidence as encouraging one to read that support as a form of normal oppositional activity, rather than as evidence of polarization, and certainly not as evidence of withdrawal from democratic politics. Throughout, we find little support for the argument that two generations of political socialization under the old regime created a political soil infertile for normal democratic politics.

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